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As archivists, we are aware of change, of the changing views of events, and of the changing sources of information about them. We weigh the reliability of an aging witness or participant against that of a younger, disinterested historian; we compare incomplete primary sources with later attempts to tell all.

As archivists, we are concerned with many types of changes: new kinds of paper, information retrieval systems, ways of making, filing, and storing records, ways of publicizing our work and available services, and sources of funds.

But what concerns us here is a deeper aspect of our work--the basic orientation from which archivists decide what aspects of our society they will choose to document. For the past several years, most archivists have been concerned with the extent to which they should be activist. When we have asked ourselves whether too large a part of the records preserved in our institutions are concerned exclusively with the elite, with the top of the pyramid, the visible tip of the iceberg of humanity, we have had to answer yes. This has been true in our college and university archives, where 90 percent or more of

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the records were produced by administrators rather than students or teachers; in our business archives, where our records consisted primarily of the personal papers of founders, board members and presidents; in religious archives where we were able to answer questions about early missionaries, generous donors, nationally prominent church members, and the clergy, but could not say much about the members of those religious groups, whether they were rich or poor, laborers, immigrants, or whatever. The questions concerning what kinds of records to collect and what kinds of activities to document are very complex. They have occupied the energies of archivists before us and will continue to do so with today's and tomorrow's archivists. I do not pretend to say that any given collection of material must be saved because an imaginative archivist or administrator can think of possible research uses of this material, nor must the same collection be destroyed because of the expense of storage, processing, and use, or because of the competition of other, more important records.[1]

The principal question to which I address myself today is the role of the archivist: How active can we be? How active must we be? My view is that archivists must be activists; and must be active as archivists. People who are archivists have many roles--we all live in many different worlds. We who, by choice or chance or necessity, are in the archives world must know and perform well our archives roles. We also have obligations as members of families, as friends, as citizens, and as people engaged (to a greater or less degree) in other occupations--librarians, microfilmers, historians, researchers, genealogists, teachers, administrators. We must be active as archivists and perform well for two reasons: first, our work is essential; second, no one else can or will do it.

Concentration on our role as archivists and determination to be excellent archivists do not narrow but, rather, widen our view of our roles. We investigate new ways of administration, new methods to share decision and management, not because we are bored with our jobs and idly seeking something else to do, and not simply because of our beliefs in the dignity of individual people (though this is important), but because we are determined to find the best

way to use our limited resources to produce the best possible archives service. We publicize our work (imaginatively, of course) to guarantee the widest use of materials that people need even though they have not been aware of their availability.

We attend meetings of archivists and other associated professionals to share our knowledge and other resources, to learn others' solutions to our present problems, and to anticipate problems for ourselves that others are now facing. We contribute to small and medium-sized archival associations (regional) to share the help we have received from others and to find assistance with our specialized areas. We provide meaningful work for everyone--professionals, para-professionals, secretaries, clerks, students, graduate students, volunteers, retirees--to insure the quality of our services, to provide an excellent means of recruitment, and to make the best use of our most important resource--people.

Thus far my "reconsideration of activist archivism" suggests that we continue to do what we have been doing, once we have reconsidered our reasons for doing it. This examination of motives should result in setting difficult goals and very high standards. Thus far, everything I have said could have been said at any time in the past one hundred years. I must now ask whether the particular conditions of today's world force us to alter our role as archivists.

We live in terrible, fearful times. We are aware of the destructive forces of war, famine, disease, illiteracy, fear, colonialism, political revolution, international terrorism. We cannot ignore particular circumstances of life and their effects on us as people and as archivists--but we must not let them distract us from our properly archival work. It is appropriate to consider here some remarks by John Updike, given in a talk in Australia.

> The last time I appeared on a platform in a foreign land, it was in Kenya, where I had to confess, under some vigorous questioning from a large white man in the audience, that the general betterment of mankind, and even

> the improvement of social conditions within my own violently imperfect nation, were not my basic motivation as a writer. To be sure, as a citizen one votes, attends meetings, subscribes to liberal pieties, pays or withholds taxes, and contributes to charities even more generously than--it turns out--one's own President. But as a writer, for me to attempt to extend my artistic scope into all the areas of human concern, to substitute nobility of purpose for accuracy of execution, would certainly be to forfeit whatever social usefulness I do have.[2]

It should be remembered that Updike's writings do reflect current trends in American life. He does not live in an ivory tower, any more than we do. We might not like his answer on the involvement of a writer in social causes, but we must remember that we claim to be every bit as professional as he is. To deny that our work as archivists takes precedence over seemingly irresistible impulses to do other things might be to say that our archival work is not truly professional.

To explain the archival role that I recommend, I shall draw on my background of scholastic philosophy for a method: I shall first describe what it is I do not mean.

Let my first example be an archivist who is almost, literally, buried in his work. He has chosen to minimize his contact with newspapers or television. He knows we are not at war but has no interest in the news beyond that. He is admired for his dedication to his work, but that work is usually measured quantitatively rather than qualitatively.

This limited life and exposure affect every aspect of his archives work. The administration of the archives is as it has always been, with decisions made at the top; no changes here, no archival revolution.

Collection policies have not changed. There are already in the archives plenty of materials to process, to make available for researchers, to index

more and more thoroughly, and additional material comes in regularly from the same administration sources. Why try to gather more material, which would cramp the available space, present new problems of incompleteness and identification? No researchers have inquired about such sources, so they must not be very important. There have also been no changes in the evaluation of material as it is processed, as no new uses are anticipated. In processing, the principle of provenance has always held sway and is still used. Indexes and other finding aids guide researchers relentlessly to records documenting the work of important and official persons.

I should not paint an entirely black picture, as this institution is considered to be an excellent archives. Only acid-free containers are used; exhibits do show the collections and attract people to use them. No researcher is turned away unfairly, but it must be noted that many collections are "closed" for very long periods of time, and little effort is made to dissuade donors from imposing such restrictions.

The recluse archivist not only does not apply for grants, he does not see the need for them. He is well read in archival matters, and even reads those essays and editorials in the new crop of archival publications that urge more activity by archivists. He is aware of current developments in archives work and even writes to a member of Congress occasionally. Perhaps the term "recluse" is unfair, as this archivist is in contact with many people--the archives staff, researchers, administrators, donors--though these contacts continue in the same way that they have "always" been.

How critical should we be of the person I have described as the "recluse archivist"? Does the gain in the internal functions of the institution offset the possible loss of opportunities to document different activities or provide different services? Should we not be as critical of the other extreme, the archivist who is too active even though his undertakings may be professionally related.

As a second example, let us consider an active archivist, perhaps a hyperactive archivist. Aware of the crises in our society and their actual or

possible effects on archives work, he is constantly involved in efforts to change, to revolutionize, some aspect of our society. Evenings, weekends, even vacations are spent in demonstrations, letter writing, meetings, canvassing, and the like. These activities do not necessarily have a bad effect on the proper performance of archival functions, but in practice they do reduce the time and the personal energy available for the day-to-day effort in the archives.

These activities reflect a certain orientation, a definite point of view, and that point of view can affect the work of an archivist as archivist. By such activity an archivist becomes aware of the fact that there are many diverse elements in our society, that many of these have never been properly studied, and that documenting them is a necessary task and an interesting challenge.[3]

Each reader or listener can form a mental picture of the hyperactive archivist. Perhaps this sort of person is so determined to document some aspect of our culture or of his institution that he becomes not just a preserver but a creator of records--this can happen in oral history projects, for example. An archivist might become overly involved with the organization and running of national, regional, state and local archival associations. These are desirable, even necessary organizations, but over-involvement can result in a neglect of one's work. Even over-involvement in one's own institution can be detrimental. This might result from service on too many committees (or doing too much work as a member of a committee).

To confine one's energies within reasonable limits does not imply a renunciation of all efforts to make improvements both specific and general. Indeed, it puzzles me that some people are constantly involved in time-consuming schemes for the improvement of their country or the world but they neglect, perhaps are unaware of, the problems which are a part of their daily living: the hiring of women and minorities at their own institutions; adequate pay for long-term employees who are really para-professionals or professionals in the level of the work they do, their excellence of performance, and their willingness to assume responsibility--these people are truly

professional in every way except salary. A similarly overlooked problem is the deplorable working conditions of people in archival institutions; inadequate light, heat, space, excessive noise, depressing environment, among others can cause physical and mental difficulties for archivists. These problems can be solved, or at least worked on, by the archivist as archivist particularly if he is an administrator or head of a department or division.

The title of my talk mentions reevaluation, and I favor a thorough, careful, thoughtful reconsideration of everything we do as archivists. Sometimes this process is construed as an attempt to do away with the old, to restructure, to revolutionize. I do not use it in this way. I favor a new look by informed, concerned archivists, and I think many of the things reconsidered will be approved as they are now. The result will be neither a recluse archivist nor a hyperactive archivist but an activist archivist who is busy with the principal concerns of his archival institution and of his profession.

The first area of activity must be administration: because it is traditionally one of our weakest areas. Archivists are not usually well trained for administration, and this might contribute to the widespread resigned acceptance of our sorry lot at the bottom of the totem pole, an attitude that has a direct adverse impact upon the working conditions and salaries of our employees. Most of us prefer "real archival work," but administration is essential for the performance of our other duties. Good administration requires a thorough knowledge of our resources and positions. We must all improve our handling of money, realizing there will be little or no improvement in the amounts we handle. Archives operations are not a luxury, they are necessary for administrators and for historians, but there might be certain luxurious aspects to them as they are now run, and we must eliminate them. Grants offer temporary respite, bringing funds to parched budgets, but we must realistically assess their real value to our total operation and the possibility of maintaining the program or project after the grants expire.

An administrator must be aware of the location of the archives in the organization of the larger

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We must particularly consider the necessity to deviate from the procedures developed by large governments when we are working in smaller or different kinds of collections--for example, college records and church records. How large must a collection be before it requires handling by the "record group" method? At this convention we might appropriately point out that provenance is a European immigrant; like other imports, it has been Americanized.

If we have this approach to archives work and to excellence in that work, we shall contribute not only to the science of archives administration but also to the art; we shall contribute not only to the work being done for certain reasons but also to the clarification and improvement of those reasons. Perhaps the "archivist as artist" is a subject for another time, but we all hope to have that mastery of present techniques and that familiarity with the past that will enable us to see more clearly what we are doing and to plan more certainly for the future. We develop a confidence that enables us to make a leap of reason. We share our creativity with others in the certain knowledge that we are doing what needs to be done. Again we find an unexpected appropriateness to our work in the reply John Updike gave to the question, "What is creativity?"

> For one thing, creativity is merely a plus name for regular activity; the ditchdigger, dentist, and artist go about their tasks in much the same way, and any activity becomes creative when the doer cares about doing it right, or better. Out of my own slim experience, I would venture the opinion that the artistic impulse is a mix, in varying proportions, of childhood habits of fantasizing brought on by not necessarily unhappy periods of solitude; a certain hard wish to perpetuate and propagate the self; a craftsmanly affection for the materials and process; a perhaps superstitious receptivity to moods of wonder; and a not-often-enough-mentioned ability, within the microcosm of the art, to organize, predict, and persevere.[4]

If we see our profession as he sees his, then we can say with him: "And I, no doubt, should write, in the decades left to me, in the highest forms I can reach, matter of my own devising."[5]

NOTES

[1]Herman Kahn, Frank B. Evans, and Andrea Hinding, "Documenting American Cultures Through Three Generations: Change and Continuity," American Archivist, 38, No. 2 (April, 1975), 147-58.

[2]"Why Write?" quoted in Picked-Up Pieces (New York: Knopf, 1976), 31-32.

[3]Kahn et al., "Documenting American Cultures Through Three Generations," 157-58.

[4]Picked-Up Pieces, xx.

[5]Ibid., xviii.